BERLIN

Cafe

Familiar Faces 1945

Emil

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BERLIN CAFÉ!

Berlin in 1945 was a dead tombstone and had been reduced beyond most people's faith that it could be saved while others said that it should be allowed to die and thus, finally purge that world of the evil that had driven the world to a world war, not once but, twice in the 20th Century and if allowed to live, could yet become the cause a third.

What no one, except Emil, saw was that this town was truly a mythical firebird and from the assembled people of every nation, who had come to bear witness to its death, instead, they would stay on and help rebuild it to become an entrusted tourist destination by as early as 1946.

Welcome to Emil's BERLIN Café, reservations are not needed but, to ensure a quality seat to view the passage of all this humanity, it is recommended to call ahead. Districts are still more suggestions than realities – so no need to ask for travel papers…

Seine Lagone

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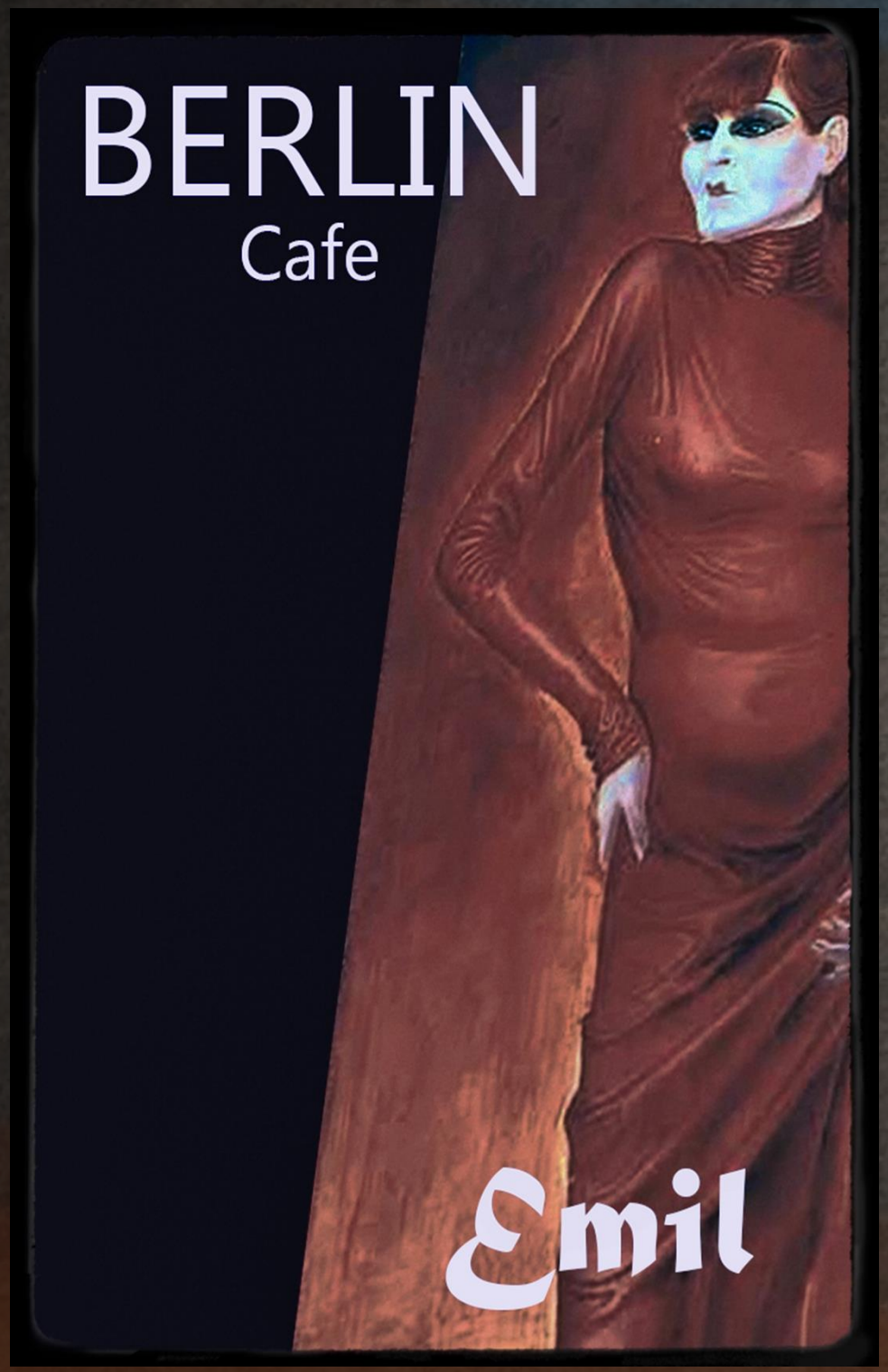

Not everyone sees opportunity even when it bites you on the bottom (I had originally used the word "butt" but Seine said that word is not allowed in print there in Singapore… Sorry Seine! I never meant to use the word "butt.") and Berlin in 1945 seemed like the last place in the world that would come to your mind in relationship to opportunity…other than, to loose your life.

Oh! Ye of little faith.

In the matter of less than a year, Berlin had gone from a dot erased from most maps by the wonders of 20th Century, military technology and had clearly established itself as the center of the growing conflict(s) between the East and the West…conflicts that we could easily, in the past, overlook as we had the Germans as a buffer but, now, less than a year after the great victory, things were going sideways and doing so at a record pace as the Allies faced the Russians face-to-face.

Conflict, suspicions and hatred ran amok all about the world, every where except in Berlin…

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Here in Berlin, with a little looking, you saw people getting-a-long, rebuilding and even sharing a cool drink. Here at Berlin Café, politics were sat aside as allied, Russians and even former, German Secret police came together to eat, drink, share a dance or a little gossip.

Ever since we opened in 1945, in what would have seemed to have been the stupidest business decision especially in April and May of 1945, we were only closed for three weeks to wait for the wildness to settle down and for order to be restored. These weeks of downtime allowed us to make all those critical connections with the new authorities and was well worth the costs involved when we were able to reopen without fear of louting, curfews or random shakedowns.

Shakedowns and payment to officials had always been a business expense and by our understanding that it didn't matter who ran things as long as we were free to do business…and, these Russian Commissars were somewhat refreshing as they were less greedy than the Nazis.

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Being an upscale establishment that catered to more distinguished clientele, a clientele with money. If you had money, you were a distinguished clientele and if you didn't, then we would refer you down the block to any numerous, burnt out beer halls and broken taverns.

The districts were still more a suggestion and no one was sure of what was what. The Wall was yet, nearly twenty years in the future.

Granted, we were not a working man's pub and that was because there were no working men as their were no companies and the factories had been closed for several years from the bombing raids. Since the working man was unemployed and was without coin, we elected to write them out of our business plan.

Our greatest success came from our using your monetary means as our Social Darwinism screening and we made it clear that our Lord, our Savor was colored green (as USA Dollars were the only stable currency other than gold)…which was as equally excepted here at

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BERLIN Café.
Gold was, at first, the coinage of exchange amongst our former German Clientele with murky ex-government ties.
Gold later lost its edge to US Dollars once the Americans moved into the city later in the Summer of 1945.
Gladly, we were in what was to become the Soviet Zone and not in the free-wheeling American Zone.
Those Americans were gangsters!
We were fortunate to be able to depend upon our Soviet Friends to always step in and send those gangsters a packing every time they would come around, looking for a piece of the action.
Much later, the next generation of Commissars would either become as corrupt as those Gangster Americans or, in rare, case by holier than Lenin in party purity and were always trying to shut us down…Thank goodness, the old general staff were rarely rotated and we were always saved…sometimes, at the last moment!

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Seems that I am getting way ahead of myself as this story began in the waning days of the war when Berlin seemed doomed.

Where others saw disaster, we saw opportunities in real estate investment and saw it as we were getting in at the bottom of the market for the coming real estate boom.

With everything in ruin and decay, what better time than to buy up entire blocks for pennies on the soon to be worthless German Mark…and since, we had a lot of that laying around…in fact, Seine's friends in Paris had sent us bales of the stuff after the liberation of Paris and they were tossing them all out of the French Banks with the other rubbage…throw into the mix, all these delusional, true believers, here in Berlin…they still believe old man Hitler…God! Has he aged in the last couple of years? That shaking of his hands gets on my nerves…Think that they would give him a pill or ten for that…nothing instils confidence in victory like a shaking leader! Or at least that is my read!

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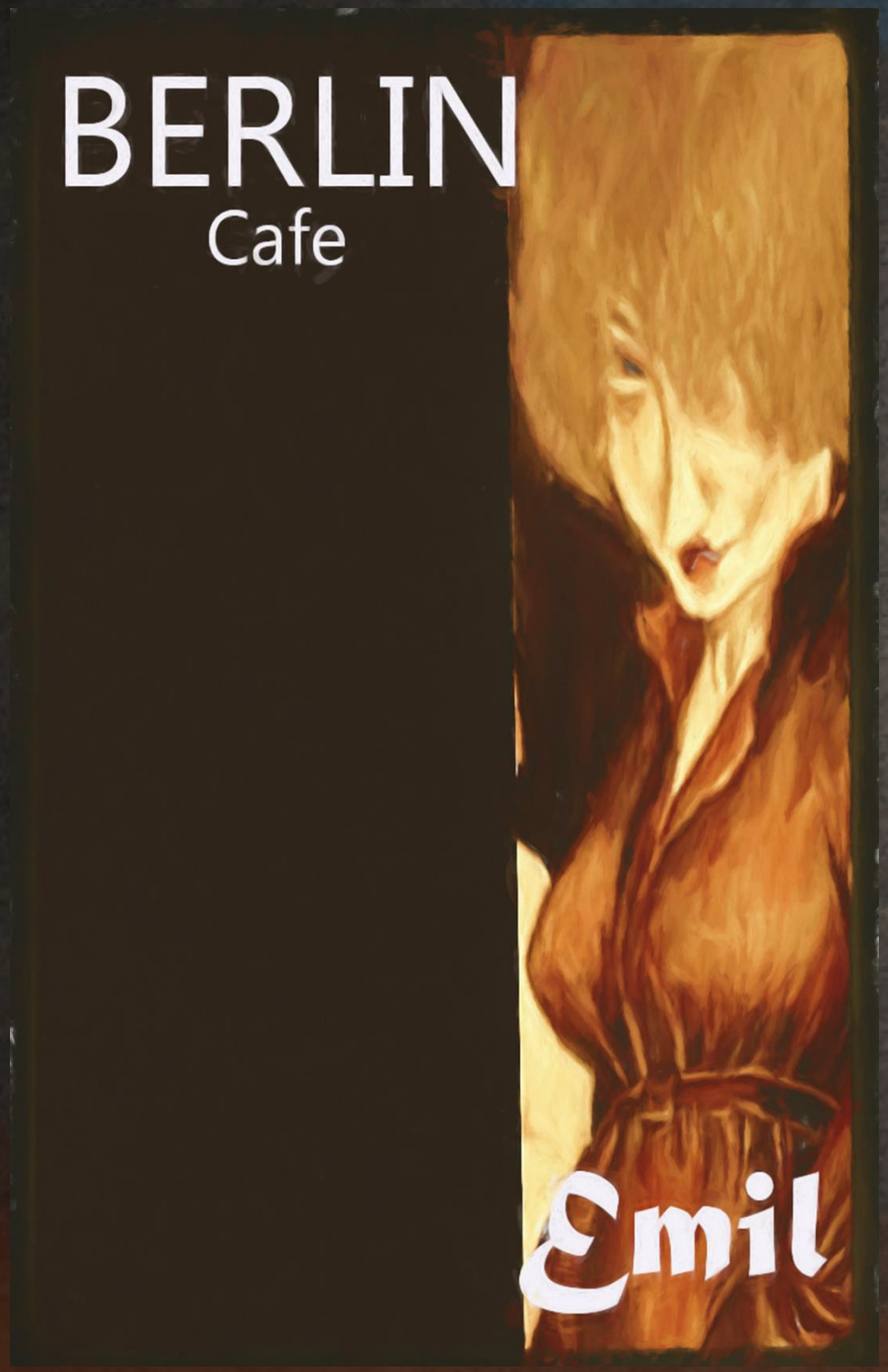

Anyway, the true believes don't see it or they choose to ignore it…which makes them the prefect marks…these rubes, believe that there really are super, secret weapons that will turn the tide…they invoke the 300 Spartans as their role model…I hate to point it out but, all 300 Spartans died a terrible death…so, the money still has value to them.

"Money talks" is universal in every culture and at every turning point in history, the man with the most, ends up on top. This seems to be holding true, here in Berlin, in 1945…

It is a dedicate dance of the doomed…they still believe in their currency but do agree with us, Berlin is doomed and like Bob Dylan would write thirty-years later, "Anyone with any sense, has already left town!"

Here we are, the smart money were bailing in great numbers, party leaders were either headed south or were planning extended vacations to South America or were, at least, headed towards the American Lines to cut a deal.

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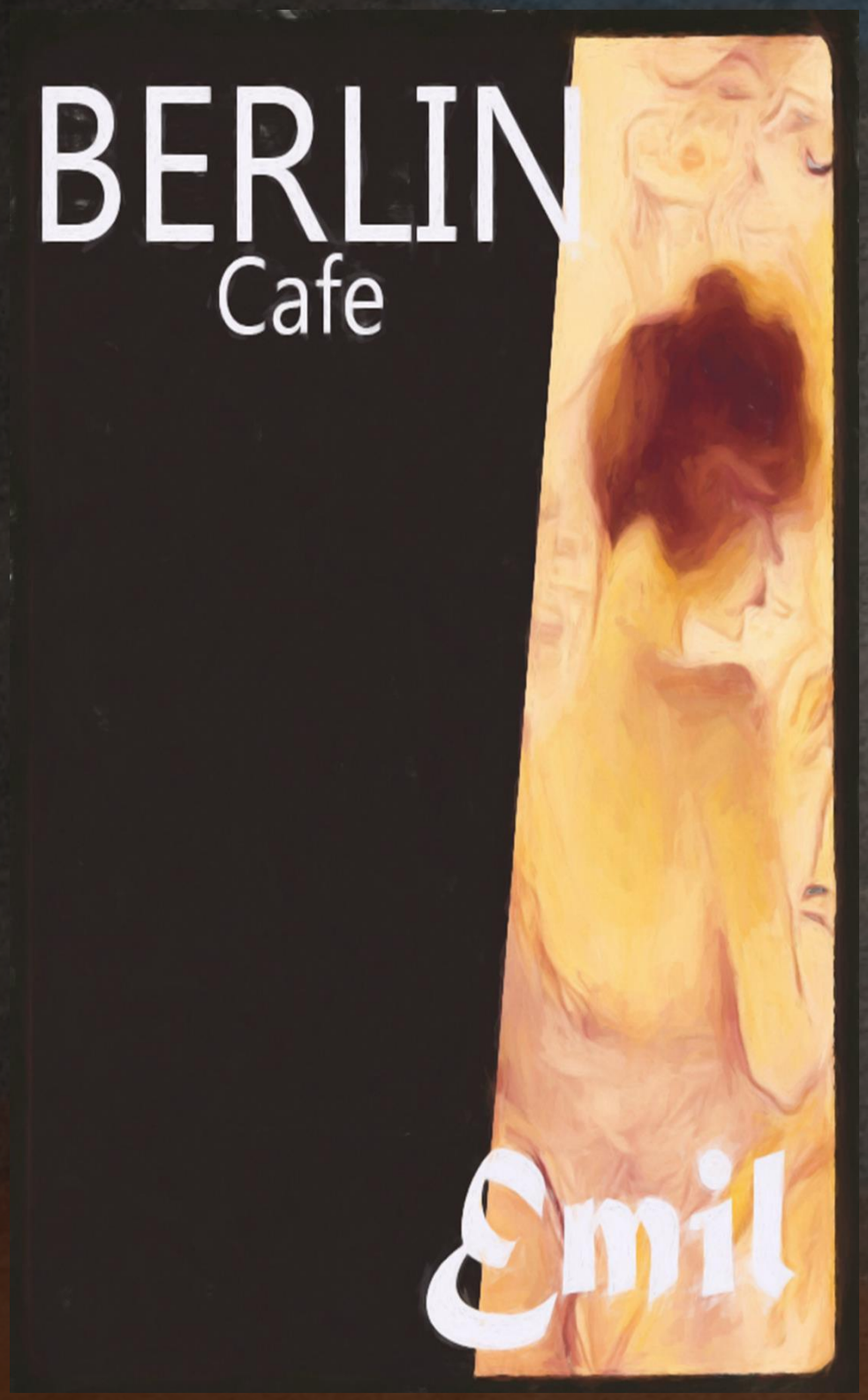

So being the smart men on the block, sitting on bales of soon to be worthless Reich Marks, we acted boldly and were buying up anything that held a title. Seine bought an entire block of flattened office buildings in the old business district for a tenth of a bale of marks…the seller was besides himself…selling his worthless property for almost pre-war prices…He was like totally stoked and was smiling as he got into his armor-plated Mercedes and last, we saw him, he and his driver were headed west, at flank speed. The key was to get the property reregistered to our company name – which unknowingly or with the proper encourage…ala, lots of cash…the few remaining city, property office clerks would not only record the property deeds but, would grandfather them to before the war.

"That's all good but," you say as you ponder why would the soon to be victors care or respect property deeds or ownership?

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Seine was and is a very smart man, as he realized the risk but, figured a way beyond that…He understood the English, the Americans long held, strong believe in property rights, so he knew that they would respect our ownership rights – especially for title deeds that pre-dated the war and the Nazi Government…

Being French and with a numerous collection of friends and business associated that the resistance and even, around General DE Gaul, he said that he had it under control.

With the incoming Russians, it was a tricky dance but, one that was workable because of Seine's long connection with the Communists in Paris Collective and that they opened doors and got us meetings.

During the battle for Berlin and while we closed and hid all of our assets in abandon, Nazi Bunkers on the Western edge of town (guarded by the best former storm troopers, in hiding, that money could buy), we made a crazy drive east with a

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Communist flag from the 1920's that we borrowed from a nearly deserted museum in midtown. With the flag…it was more a mighty banner that almost covered the entire car…we approached the Russian Lines and greeted them as the liberators that they were for all of us, we the oppressed Communists of Berlin.

That and the letters that Seine was carrying from The Paris Collective were all we needed to be welcomed into the conquering horde.

In the follow weeks, we made the circuit, behind Russian Lines giving the ordinary troops, Seine would bring them to tears and rage over the abuses of the Nazi Gangsters.

In this time, we meet with quite a few of the army leadership, these would, many of them would go on to be district leaders once Berlin had fallen.

For the most part, they were no different than any other military leader that I have ever meant…flatter their ego, offer them access to quality goods and financial resources not

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available to them back home, in Mother Russia and they all fell in line…like little puppies.
Yes, Campers!
They too were gangsters but, they were also more reasonable and considerably less greedy than their Nazi counterparts, it was a pleasure to deal with them and I can not fault them, their word was binding and without question, better than the gold that we were offering them…
Well! To be truthful, the gold that we were to give them for at the moment, we had little or none – except for emergency "Get me out of here…don't shoot me!" funds stashed safety away.
The gold would come later after the fall of Berlin and it was official that our remaining bales of Reich Marks were, indeed, they were worthless except as souvenirs that Seine sold to the soldiers…the tourists…that occupied the city.
With our connections made, we decided to take a holiday until all the mess in Berlin was over and order had been re-established and our friends were properly in charge.

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After another couple of weeks, touring Warsaw…
I know!
Warsaw!
But, it was a safe city by then, we were firmly established as Heroes of the Revolution…being only of a handful of Berlin Communists known to survive the war years.
It was a perfect scam as who was left alive to challenge our colorful storyline…and, if they did, we would merely accuse them of being Nazi, Counter Revolutionary Thugs trying to scam our dear, Russian Brothers!
Warsaw, although it looked to be a miniature version of what we had left in Berlin, there was, just as much or more opportunity(s) as there had been going on in Berlin.
If only we would had been here in 1939 when the Germans had tossed bales of Polish Money in the dustbin and which, by some crazy, Polish Gangster thing, was still accepted along with the script that the Russian Army had issued to worthy citizens.

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We were later to discover that some young, Polish Gentlemen had had the same foresight as we had in the dying days of Berlin; they scooped up as much of the abandon currency as they could…hoping that it would be valuable again…after the war.

Initially they were disappointed by the Germans refusal to offer an exchange for Reich Marks during the occupation – which created financial panic and made everyone poor over night.

The Germans understood what the Americans did in the next century, in Iraq; people with economic means (money) don't need to listen and feel that their money gives them a right to speak their mind and resist the new occupiers.

It is a simple matter that poor people, especially those without money, they tend to listen and are more likely to do whatever you want them to do…for money… "Money, Talks!"

Yes, it does! It speaks volumes! It writes history too. And, that's what they did in Poland in 1939.

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I understand that you are wondering how, in this world or the next, could we, did we end of in Berlin in 1945.
Fair question! Looking back, we still debate the odds of such an unusual adventure…I blame Old Lady Luck…our cheap ass guardian angel…you know the one that rides into Tulsa on the Greyhound and always at the very last moment, pulls enough strings to keep our nose barely above water.
You know her!
You got one of them too?
We had escaped Nanking, gone to Bangkok where Seine and I had a roaring business of selling "Adventure and Treasure" Tours to the local colonial tourist and an occasional expat business type. Nothing brings out greed, colonial pocketbooks more than Seine's tales of lost temples with shrines of gold…
We were doing a fine, bang-up business until some well-to-do colonial had to ruin it with a complaint of fraud…So, we departed to a new,

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departed to a new, fresh start in French Indo-China and it was business as usual.

By 1944, we had survived the Japanese coming in mass in 1942, the crazy resistance fighters of the Viet Mehn that made treasure tours to dangerous and costly (as they tended to just take all of our money instead of the agreed upon percentage(s), the allied aerial bombings and the more importantly was the fact, that the Japanese didn't pay their soldiers enough for us to make a decent living off them…too much volume and not enough quality…too few yen per soldier to make any kind of score.

Being friendly with the Vichy French Managers that actually ran the country for the Japanese had kept us under the radar and usually out of jail.

By mid 1944, even a blind man could see that the war was lost and our Japanese connections just stared off into blank space or told very long winded stories about their homes, families and what it was like when they were, merely children.

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Any rationale person would start to calculate what the future here held for us…The Japs were all excited about dying for their Emperor and were making plans to stage great “Lets all get killed!” charges that would either drive them to the gates of heaven or hell, I guess?

The Vichy were packing and making travel plans as they were convinced that those crazy, Viet Mehn would pour out of their jungle lairs and kill everyone…seeing that they never had a fighting spirit, they were doomed.

There was some hope that those French Rubber Farmers…who had fought everyone to defend their lands but, still sold their rubber to the Japanese War Effort…it was a wide card, but, they might be encouraged to take over for the Japanese. Most Vichy didn’t have faith in them and that was why they were getting ready to leave.

Where do you go?

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If you are Vichy?
You know that you should not go home because what you did in the war, seems that you backed the wrong horse and it was coming back to bite you…bite you big time…it certainly would not bode well for you in a climate where the former Resistance and Allies were already hunting down former Vichy Officials.
Where do you go?
It was a tough decision and one that ended up being the path of least resistance, the Germans who had used the coastal cities to supply random U-Boats heading to or coming back from Japan, their business community in the major port cities in the north and their officials…they were pulling up stakes and a lot of the important Vichy where being offered seats and refuge in the Fatherland…
The Vichy Officials that Seine was friends with,

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They continually reassure Seine that they believed that Germany's Secret weapons would save the day, give the allied a bloody nose and force a peace in the west…with that, they believed, they bought into this German Day Dream of Victory…they said, "once the Allied had been forced to sue for peace…the Germans could turn their armies to the east again and crush the Russians with the same weapons."

After many a night at our little café in Hanoi, nights of debating the merits of what to do…were we not too tied to the Vichy and thus, the Japanese…the Viet Mehn were not to be considered our friends and rarely did they honor their deals when we have done business.

The Japanese were suicidal crazy and it was an easy decision to abandon them as quickly as possible…we might go back to China but, there was a three way war raging there between the Nationalist Gangsters, the Communists and the poor Japanese that could not find an honorable

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Means to retire from the field and go home.
So what do we do?
There are no easy choices!
Claudie suggest Bangkok but, I argued against it because it was another city in chaos with the local military trying to prove that they were Anti-Japanese to start with by coming down hard on all former colonials and expats.
Plus, I reminded them all, that we had not left Bangkok under the best of terms and we had been told that they would jail us, if we were stupid enough to return.
Claudie argued that those officials may have retired or might be scattered to the countryside to join the resistance that started once it was clear that the Japanese would lose the war.
“It would be a gamble but, what other choice do we have?” Claudie pleaded to Seine and me.
Seine, being the reasoned thinker that he always was, laid out an argument that the best chance was to take his Vichy Friends up on their offer of

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Free passage to Germany and to roll the dice that the Germans would, in the end, surrender and at least, we had the best chance dealing with the allied on almost home ground.

Late into the night and deep into our final bottles of expensive Sake, it was a deal done and we all departed back to our flats to pack a small bag as the assigned U-Boat was scheduled to sail in the AM.

Seine being the master of gab and through his mastery of understanding human nature, he secured both Claudie and me seats on the departing U-Boat.

It was a long, difficult sea journey and to be stranded inside this tin can for the almost eight weeks it took us to get to Germany, it was trying at best!

Then, yet, another week of traveling through bombed out cities and our assigned house at what was still the Vichy French Council, there in Berlin.

It was January 1945 by the time we were up and about…the rest of the story, you already know.

Snapshots Berlin – April 1945

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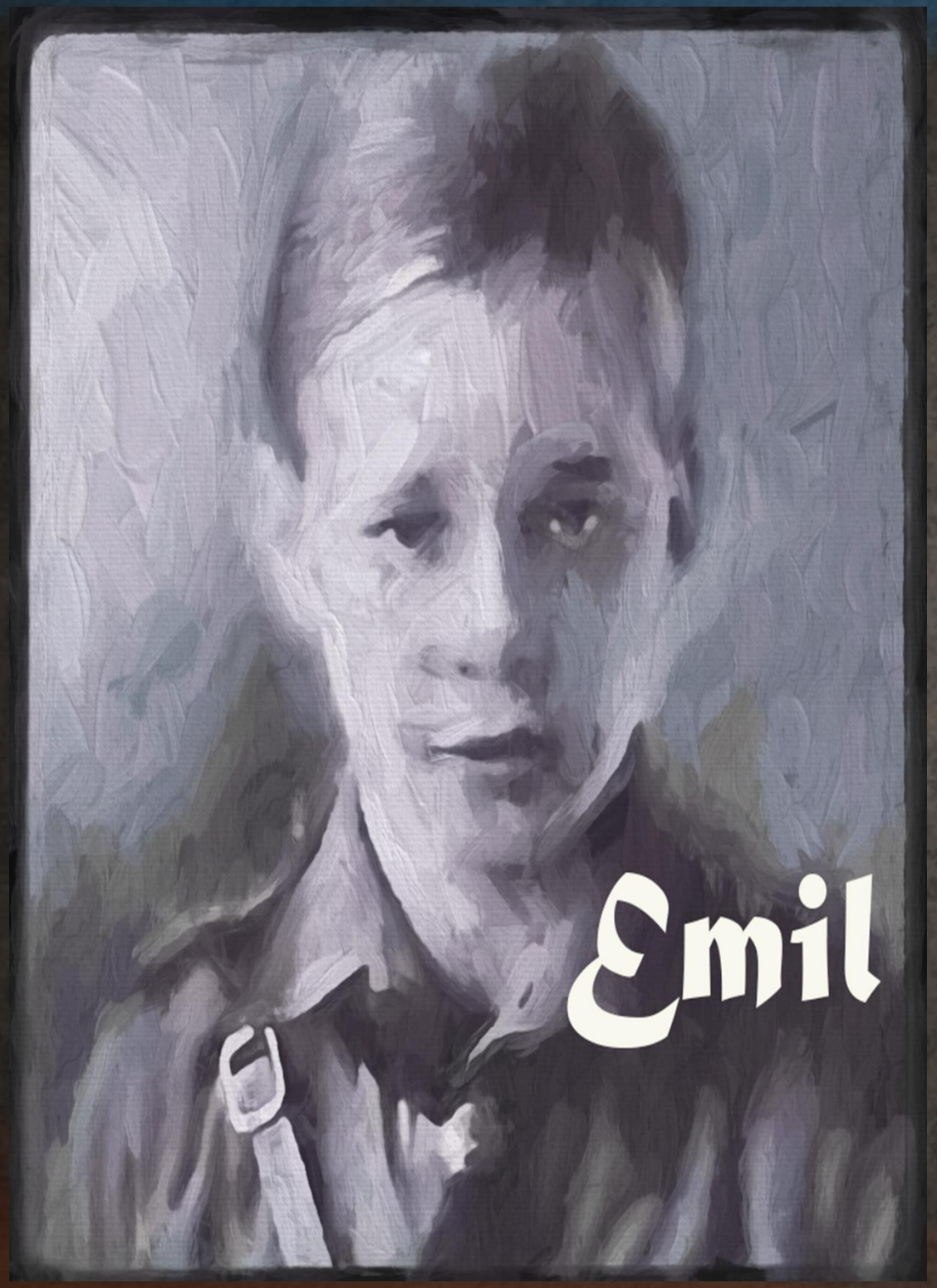

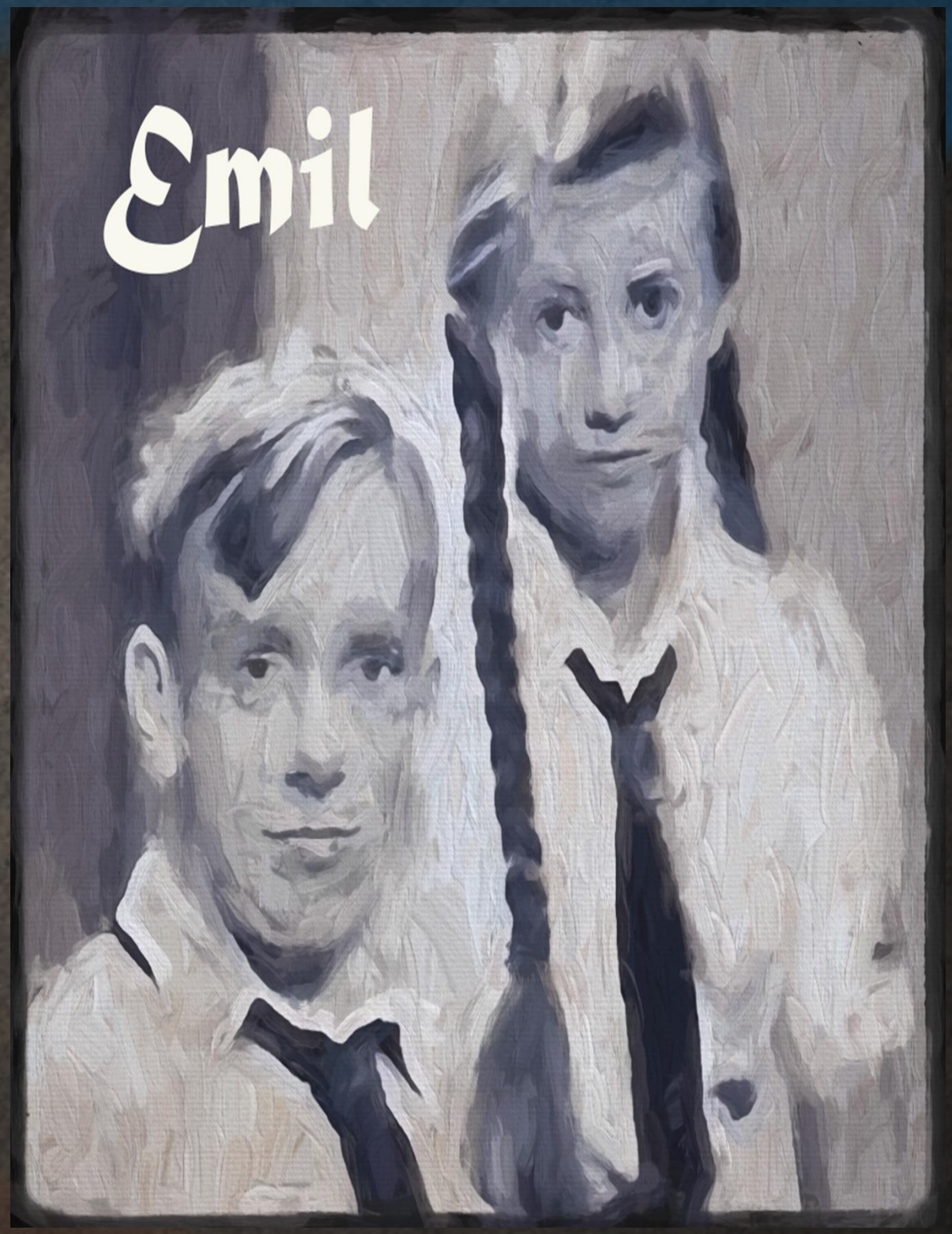

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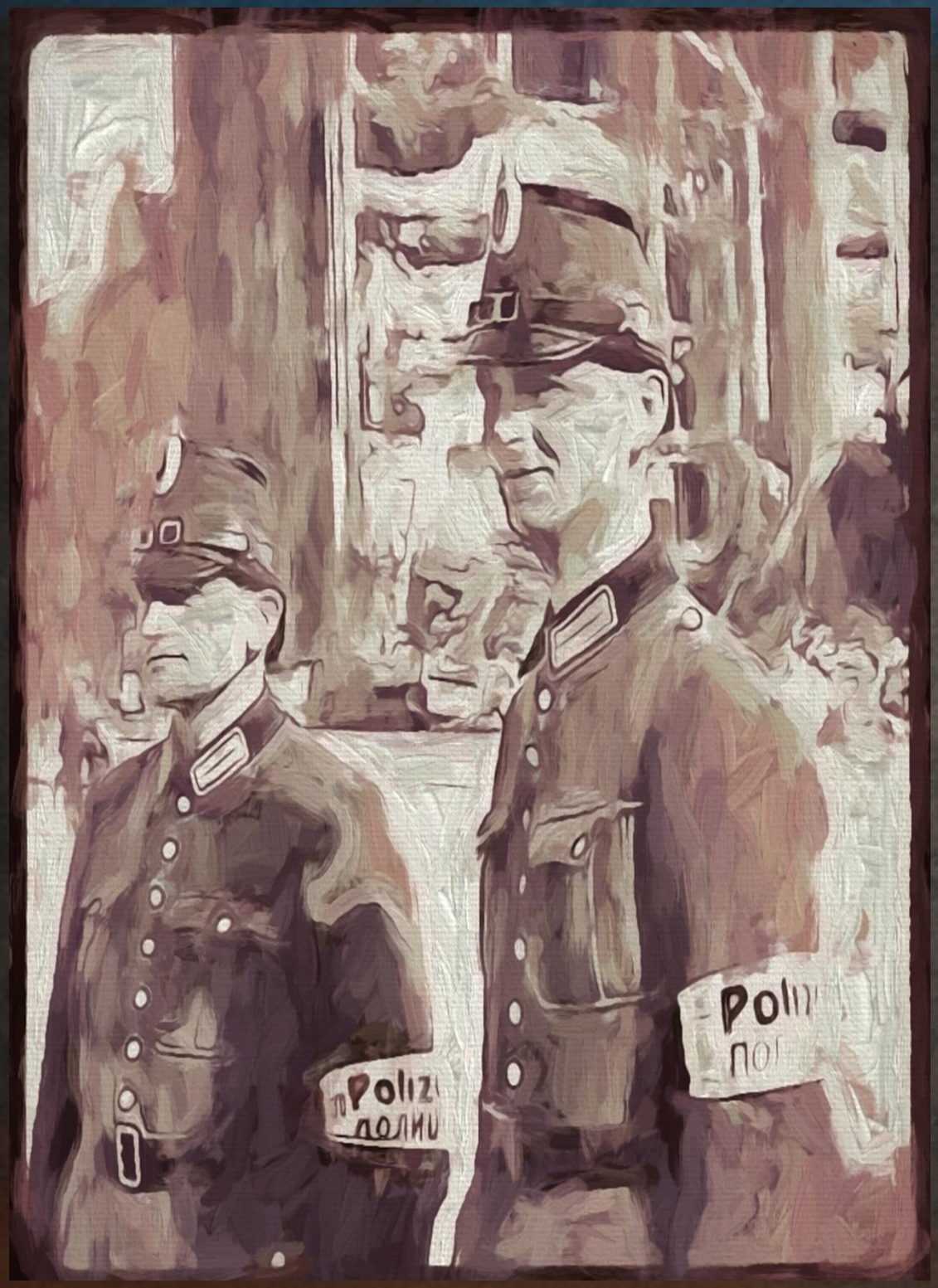

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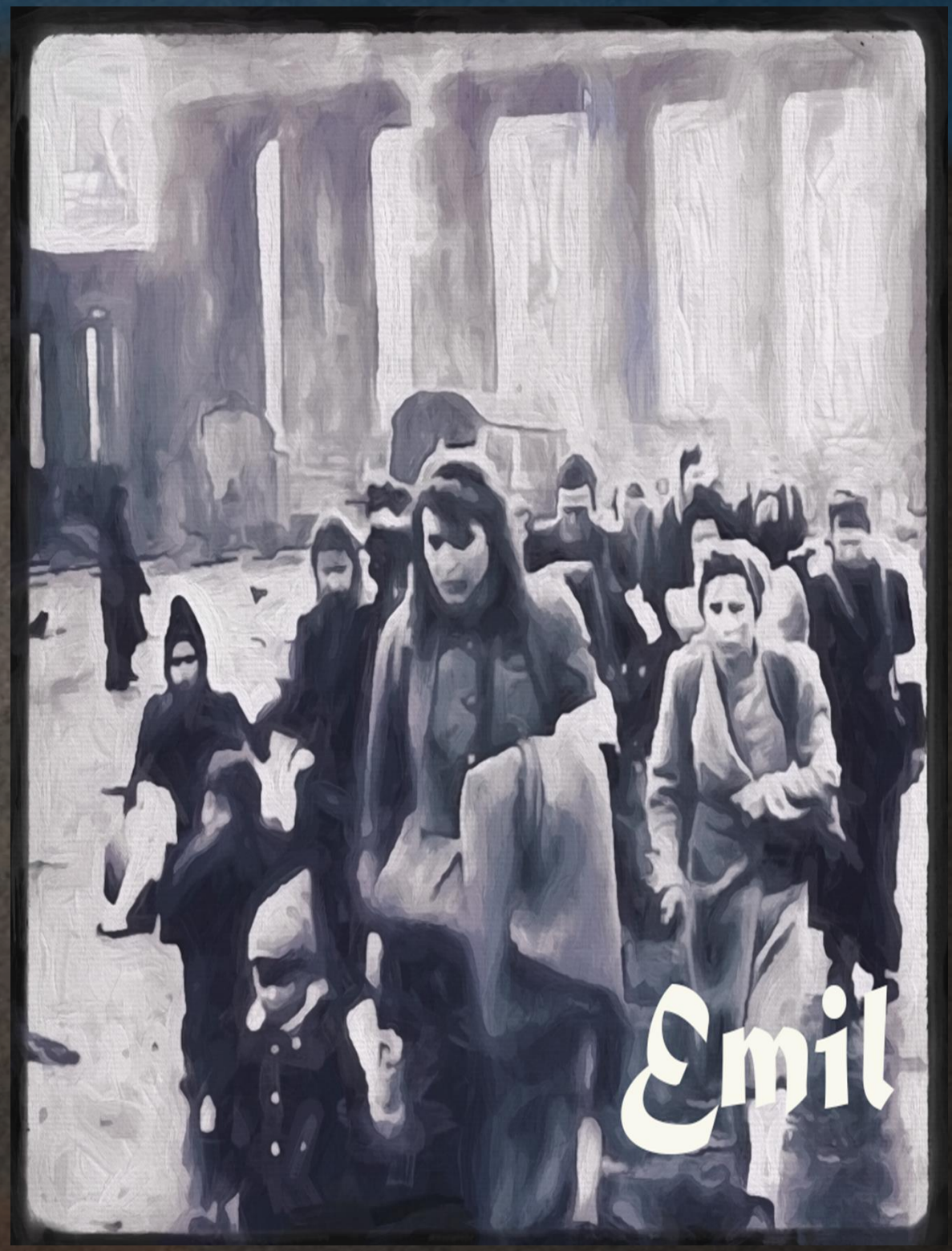

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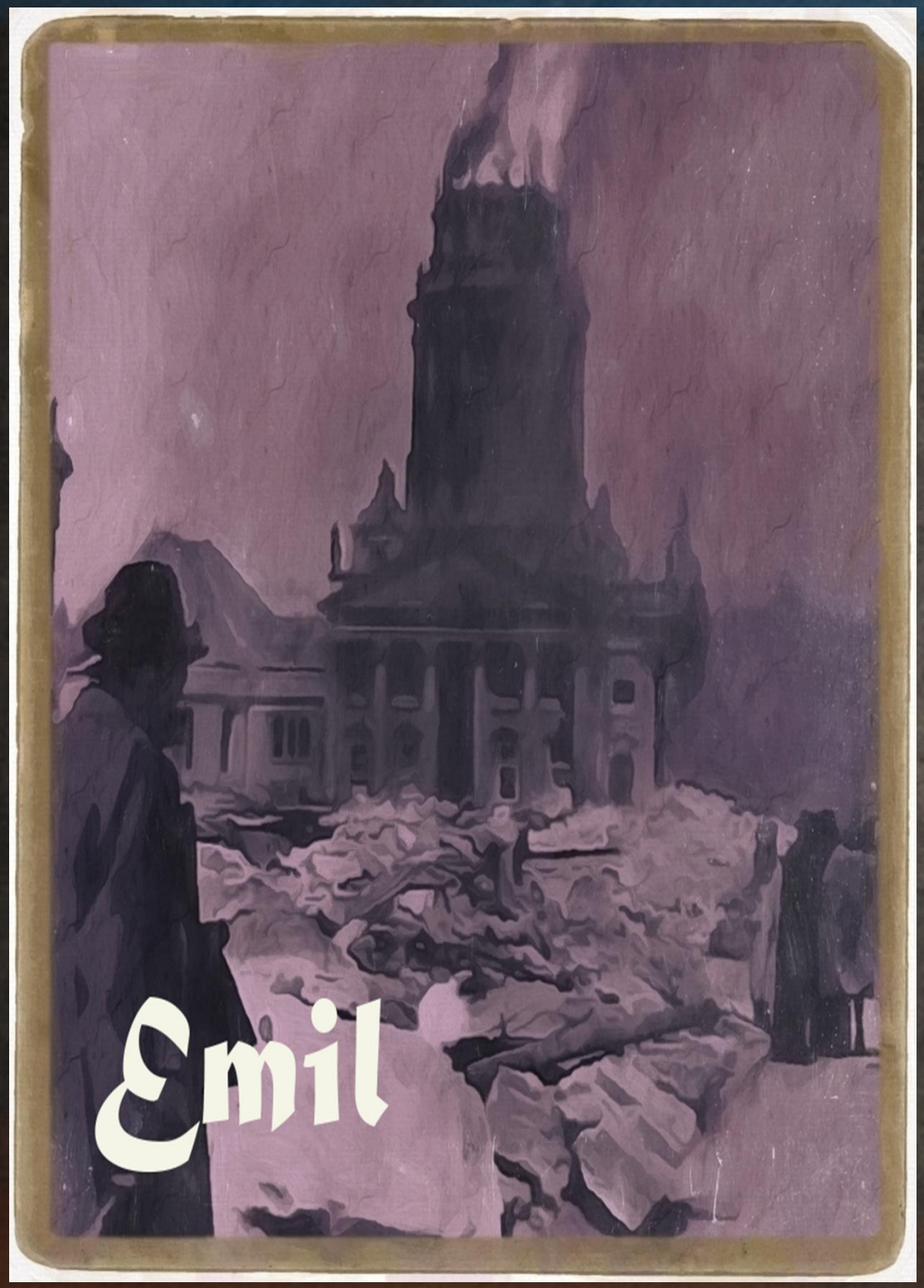

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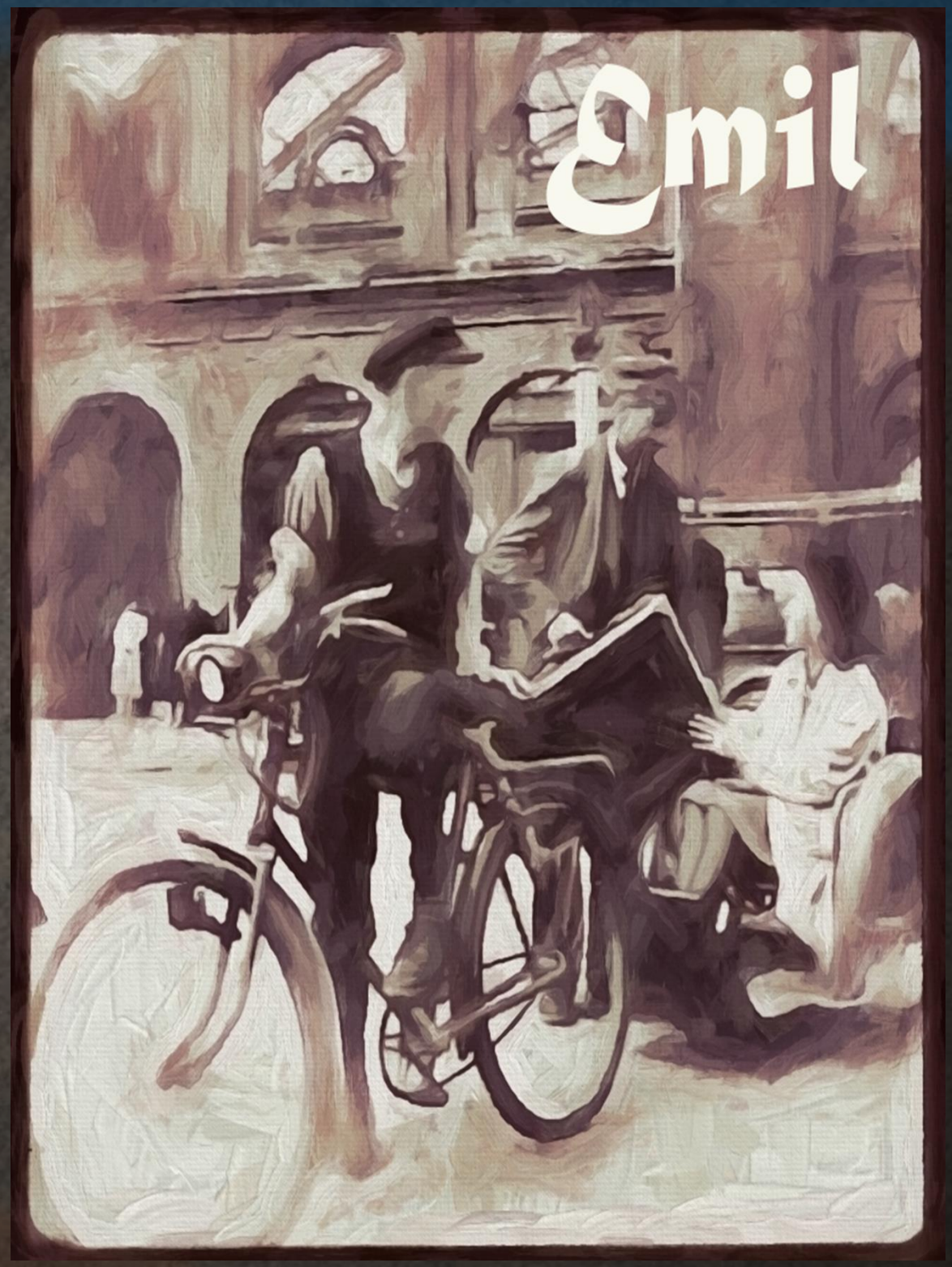

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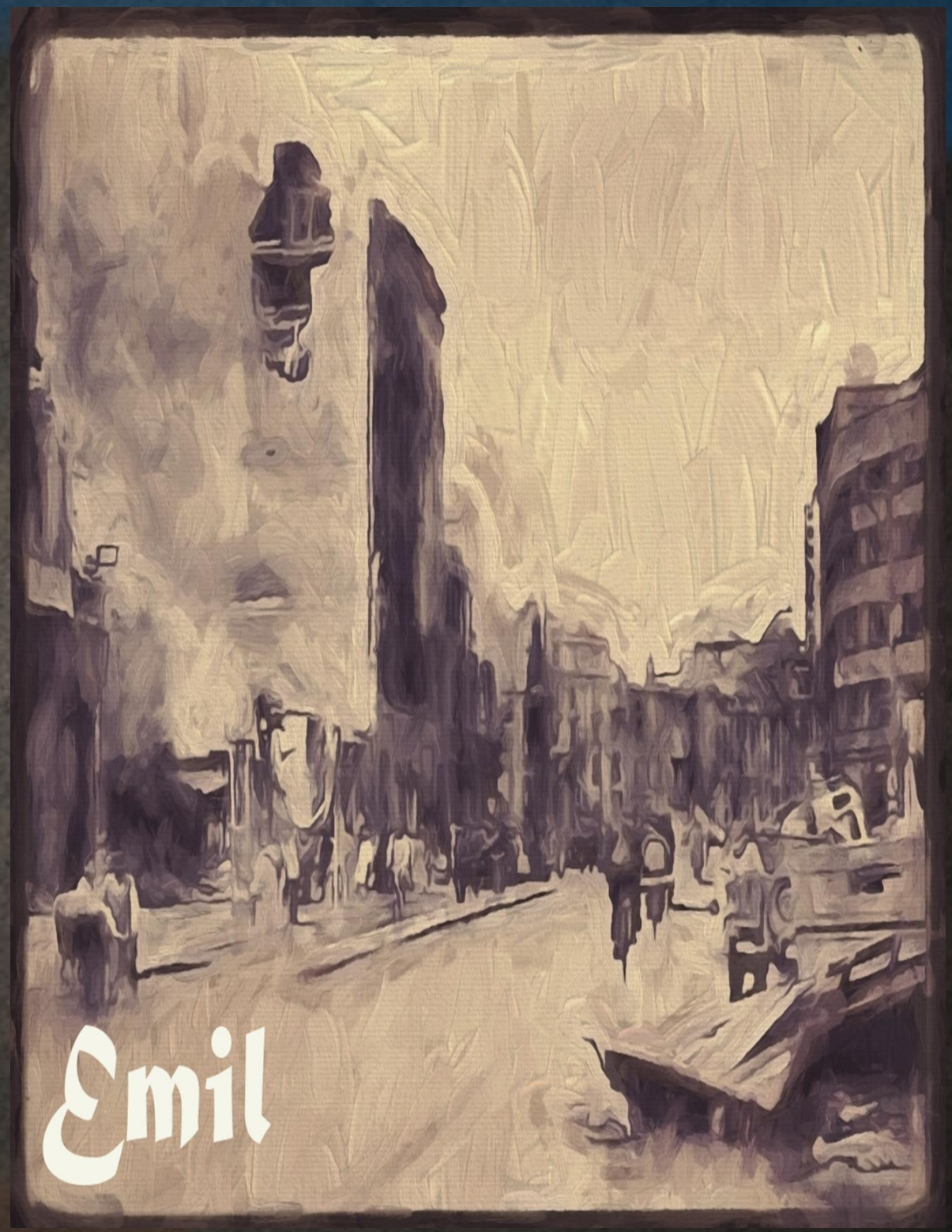

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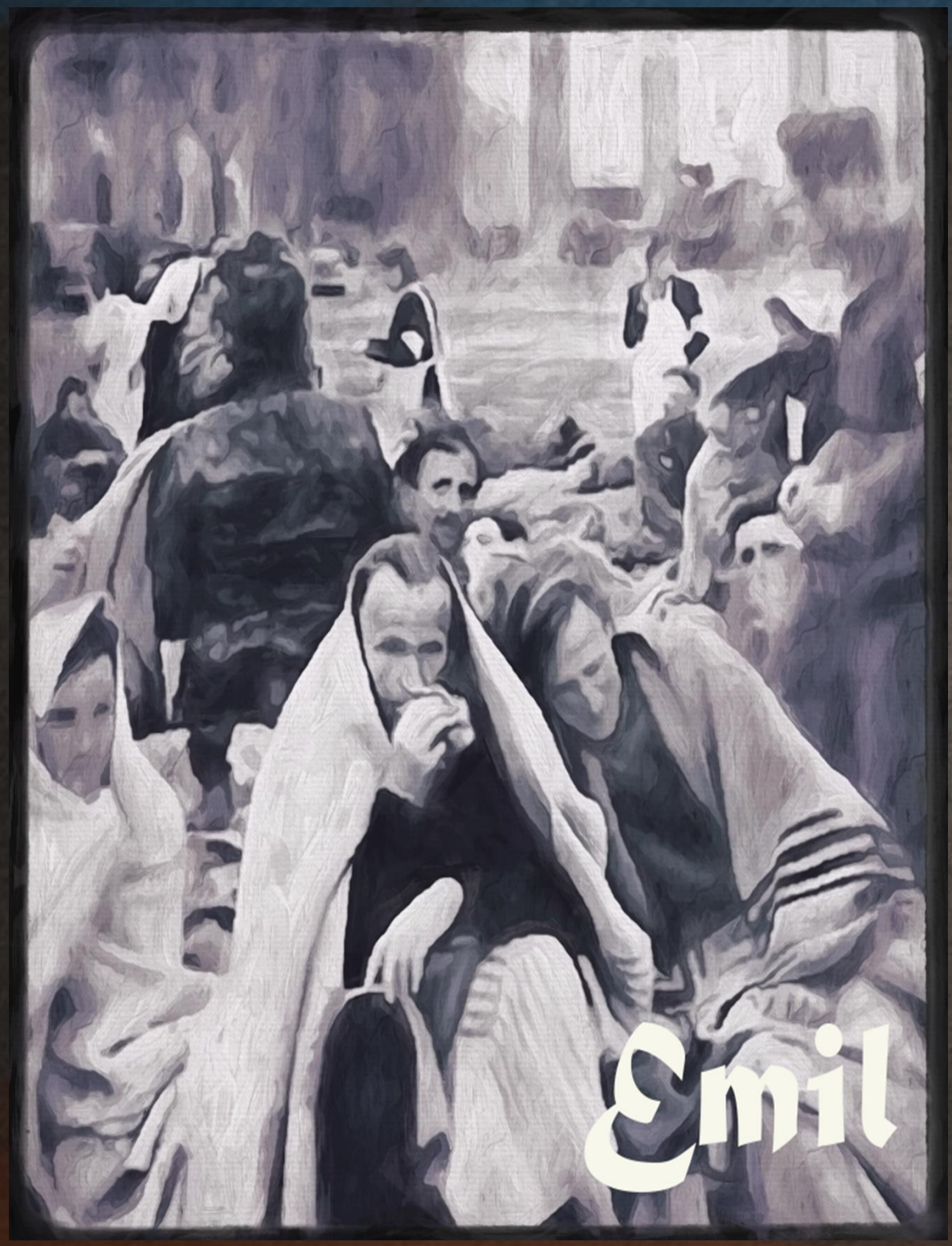

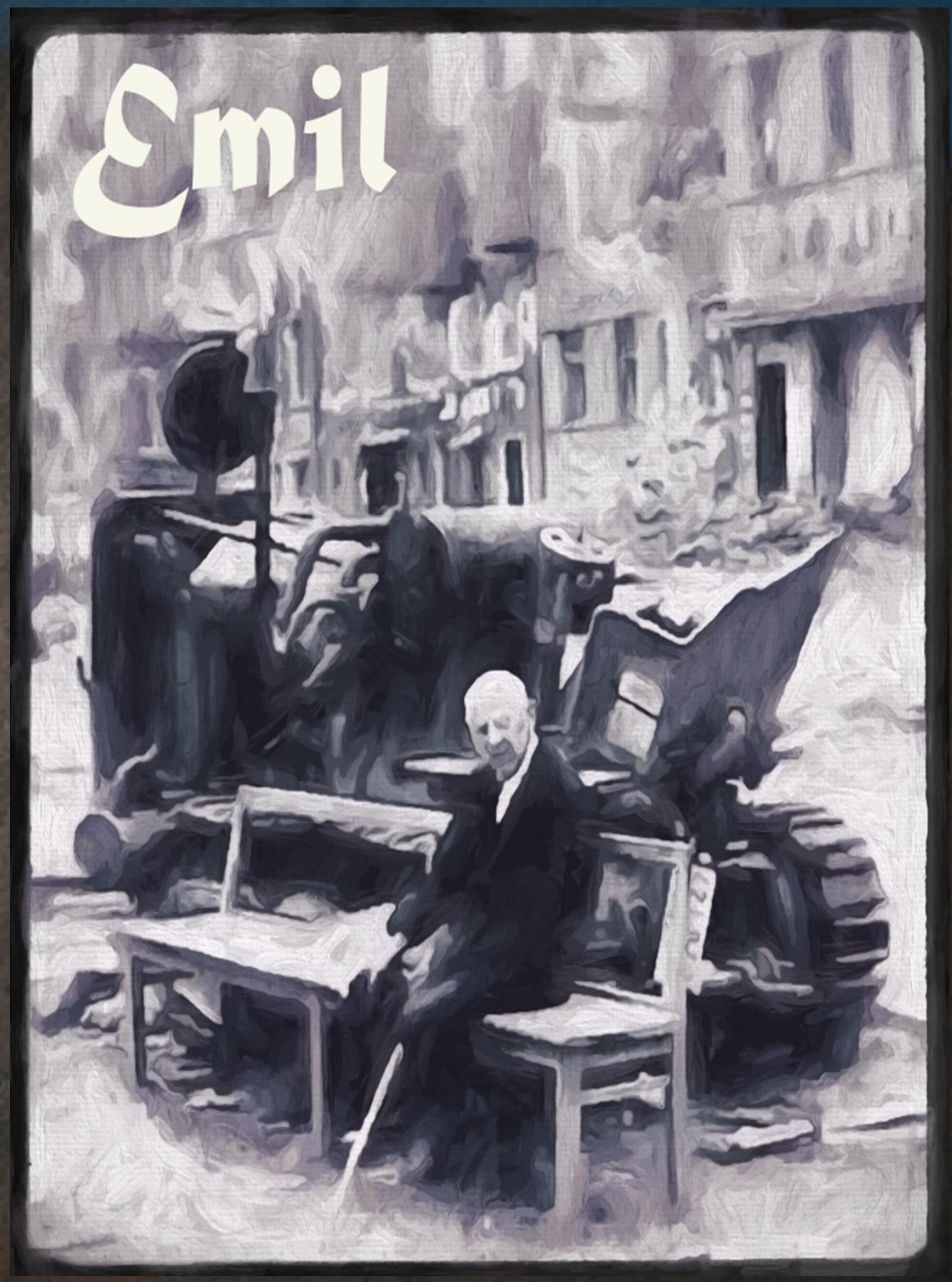

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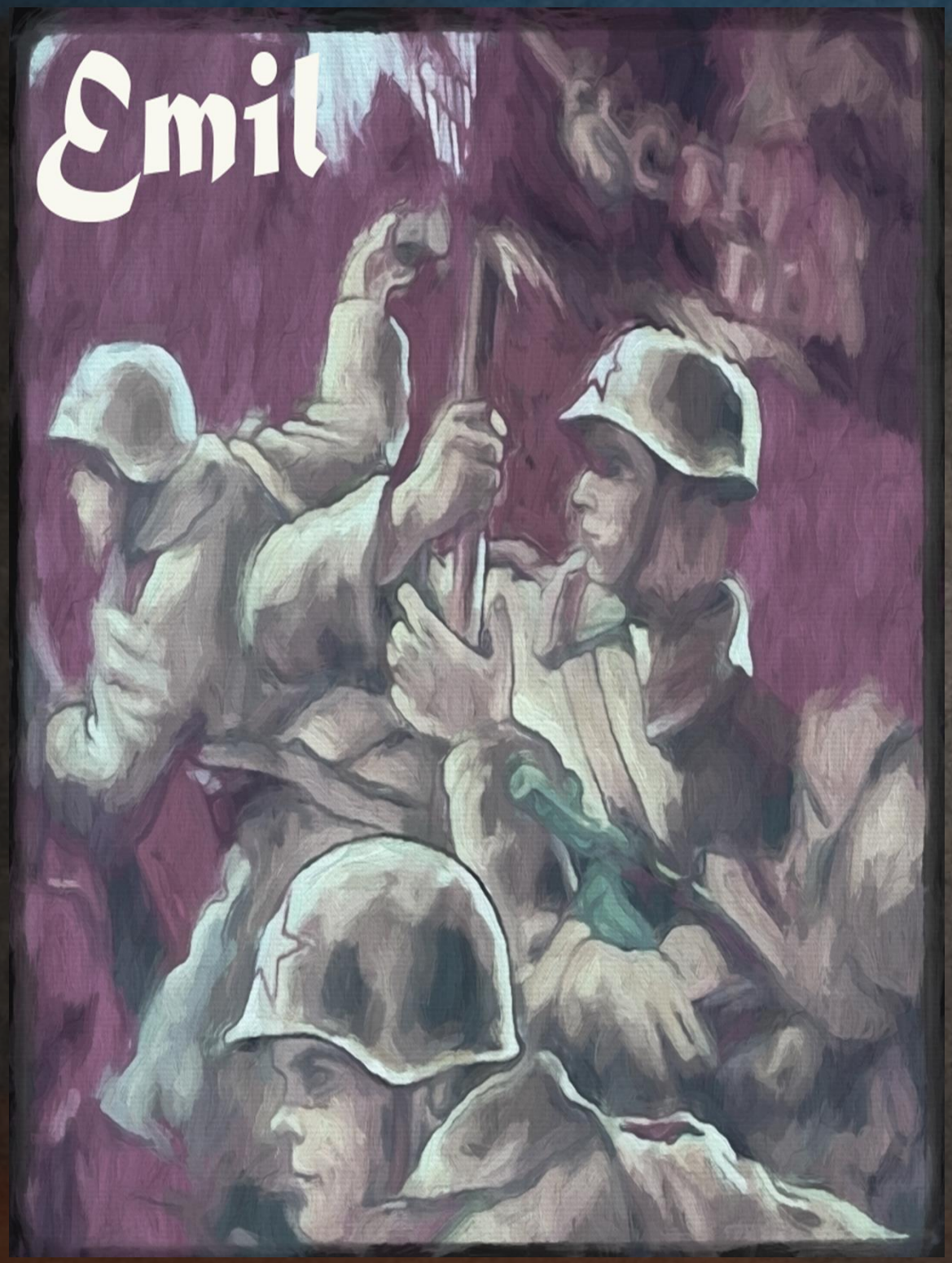

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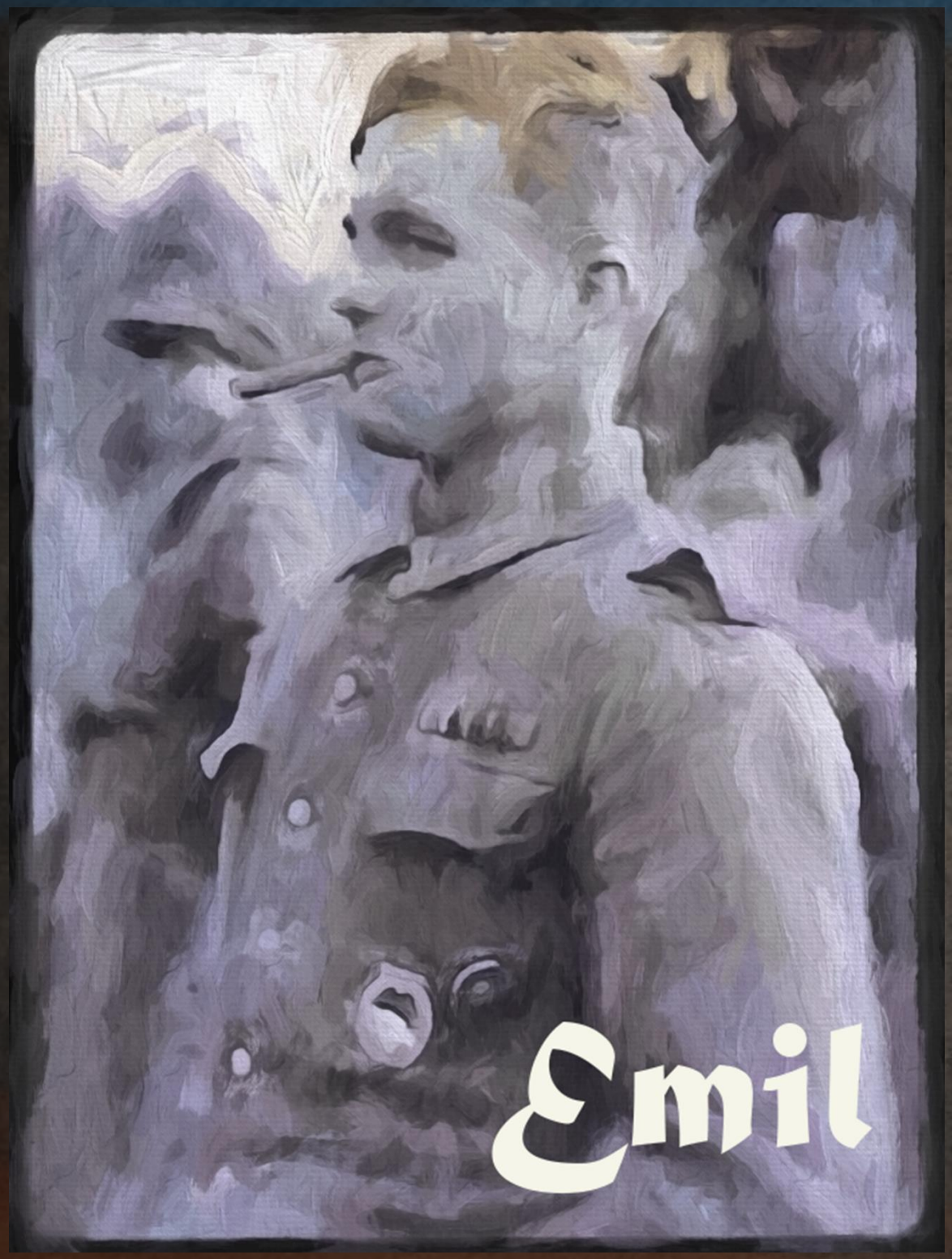

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{Seine is sitting at the bar in the newly restyled bar at the Berlin Café when Emil comes in and sits down on the bar stool next to his. Seine nods to Emil and orders Emil a cold beer}

Seine: Where have you been all morning? Herr Smidt was here again asking about you. When are you going to deal with that situation? His coming around is not good for business these days! Too many questions from our Russian Regulars.

Emil: Seine! Herr Smidt was a very valuable assist and have you forgotten that had it been for Herr Smidt and his former SS Boys, you know, we might not be as well off as we are! They did their security job for us very well and they earned their coinage keeping all the looters out of our treasure (investment) bunkers…Without them, where would we be now?

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Seine: OK! We paid Smidt a ton of money to do that. Emil! Times are changing and with all the ugly stories about what the SS really did in the war circulating around, we shouldn't have such a high profile character like Smidt coming around.

Emil: The poor guy is down on his luck these days. Somehow, he wasn't bad enough to be in hiding or important enough to be living in South America with a lot of the high mucky-mucks of the party. He isn't asking for a handout but for work…Isn't there something that we can throw his way…?

Seine: Emil, what part of this can't you understand? Your buddy, Herr Smidt, was a SS Captain and is probably a wanted war criminal…Do you forget, that our Russian Friends would be very uncomfortable should his presence here be known! You need to handle this…PLEASE!

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Emil: OK! Seine, don't lose your pantaloons over this…I will tell him to not come by any more. Still, we owe him a lot and it isn't like you to go back on a debt…a major debt, at that.

Seine: He is a war criminal! He ain't no maître de at the Hindenburg! Yes, his boys did a good job keeping their heads and blending in…they did their job very well but, I remember them being very well paid for it, too! But, we can't take the chance and let him bring down our bar and would your loyalty to a worker, be worth us ending up in some slave camp in Siberia?

Emil: OK…I'll handle it!

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Seine: What you think about all this talk about the old man (Hitler) really being dead? I don't believe it for a moment. He made it out and is probably living the good live down in the Argentines.

Emil: Ya! But, he was looking to be in really bad health in this last year and the Russians claim they have a body. So, who knows!

Seine: I don't believe it for a moment! You know Commissar Kenningson and his staff? They were here the other night and they said that everyone here (in Berlin) is running scared as Stalin is demanding a body as proof that Hitler is dead. They didn't stay long as the Kremlin got them running amok, all about the countryside…24-7, trying to come up with a body. I got from them, the story of the bodies at the bunker was a faux story created to please Stalin.

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Emil: So, you think that he got away?

Seine: You kidding! They spirited the old man out of town way before the real shit hit the fan. Even then, remember getting in and out of Berlin wasn't that hard, it did take some creativity and a bit of luck…remember, we blew through the Russian Lines and even, took a vacation in Warsaw?

Emil: But, Seine, that was you genius! Who would have had the nerves to go up to the Russian Lines and who else but you, could have talked you way into us being greeted as "Heroes of the Revolution?"

Seine: That's true but, if we could do it, they could have had a mile-long parade to celebrate his leaving and still got away. You remember that mousey, office clerk…the one from Bormann's Office…what was her name?

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Rita wasn't it? Anyway, she told me that her boss had major plans to relocate the government, if the war went against them. She told me that the important people were already on cue to leave by December 1945.

Emil: Really? I remember her but, I never had a conversation of any length with her and then, she disappeared too.

Seine: She was interesting to talk to. She had been a file clerk and was super snoopy. She told me that she would read the files that she was pulling and filing away. She has all the shit on what they planned if Berlin fell. She told me that Hitler and his wife were against leaving but her boss, Bormann insisted and reminded Hitler of what they did with Mussolini's body, even, after he was dead. She said that there had been long conversations on who was to go and who would be (she said, her boss's terms)

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offered up to the Allies, sacrificed for the success of setting up a Fourth Reich.

Emil: What happened to her?

Seine: I think she is dead. She was not only snoopy but, she certainly was gabby! Someone, thought that she knew too much and she disappeared. Maybe they took her to South America? The Russians didn't pick her up or else, there would be a billion Commissars heading to South America. Stalin really has a hard on for this guy…they were once friends, did you know?

Emil: Not to change the subject but, we need to talk to the girls about not openingly dating our customers! We don't want to be known as the Berlin Brothel! I mean…I understand and I know that most of them are now single moms and the extra money they raise is well needed but, they need to do that off shift.

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Seine: Agree! That is what happened to that bear bar two streets over. It was a mess and after numerous fights…riots over the girls was why they were closed down. We got too much invested here for that…Remind me and we will have a short meeting with the staff before we open, tonight. Did we get the new wine shipments from our French Friends?

Emil: You need to really talk to them, they called today and were crying and complaining that the American Army was stopping some of the truck and they said, some GIs seized one truck that had the Napoleonic cognac…and now they are saying that it will be another week or so…I complained that even with the daily bombings, they seemed to deliver faster back then than they do now!

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Seine: They are just getting greedy! They probably sold our cognac to one of those American Supply Sargent Gangsters! I will call Peti tomorrow, if the phones are working down at the Post Office. Do you think they will ever get the phones back up and running properly? They did with the postal service! But then again, I don't think they ever stopped mail delivery (here in Berlin) even in the worst fighting, I never failed to see some postal worker scrambling up some ruined, apartment block with a mail delivery and already (now) we are starting to get junk mail flyers.

Emil: Got to go up to the Regional Command Center and grease a few new wheels. Do you think that our 50% off cards are working? I am selective in who I give them to as I understand that we need to build this place into a high-end social club…will talk to you when I get back!

EMIL WEST!

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